"Sparta in Greek political thought: Plato, Xenophon, Aristotle, Plutarch"
Forthcoming in Atack, *Oxford Handbook on Ancient Greek Political Thought*

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ABSTRACT: Classical Sparta is an enigma in many ways, but for ancient and contemporary political theorists it is especially intriguing insofar as its *politeia* (or its educational/political/social system or "constitution") produced a city-state that was both the hegemon of all other Greek city-states, for instance during the 5th century Persians wars, but was also ignobly defeated by Thebes at the battle of Leuctra in 371, slightly more than a century later, after which its hegemony collapsed and its subject population of helots won a war of emancipation. How did Sparta field citizen-soldiers in the 5th century who were without parallel in their bravery and military prowess? And why did Sparta, perhaps under the same *politeia*, collapse just over a century later? Xenophon, Plato, Aristotle, and Plutarch searched for answers to such questions in the Spartan public educational program, its mixed constitutions, and its apparently militaristic goal and orientation. Such 4th century intellectuals (and Plutarch, writing in the 1st century CE) debated whether Sparta's collapse was the result of deep-rooted problems within its Lycurgan constitution or in Sparta's subsequent departure from that constitution; there also is significant debate concerning the education and roles of women within Spartan society.

Keywords: Sparta, Xenophon, Plato, Aristotle, Plutarch, Lycurgus

Word count: 8,317 words (excluding abstract & title page)

INTRODUCTION[1]

In his account of the Persian Wars, the fifth century historian Herodotus reports an exchange between the Persian monarch Xerxes and a deposed Spartan king, Demaratus, who became what Lattimore (1939) later classified as a "tragic warner" to Xerxes. On the eve of the battle of Thermopylae, Xerxes asks how a small number of free Spartiates can stand up against the massive ranks of soldiers that Xerxes has assembled. Herodotus has Demaratus reply:

> So is it with the Lacedaemonians; fighting singly they are as brave as any man living, and together they are the best warriors on earth. Free they are, yet not wholly free; for law is their master, whom they fear much more than your men fear you. This is my proof—what their law bids them, that they do; and its bidding is ever the same, that they must never flee from the battle before whatsoever odds, but abide at their post and there conquer or die. (Hdt. 7.104, Greene trans.)

Although Greek forces led by Sparta were defeated at Thermopylae, their heroic stand makes clear that Demaratus is hardly guilty of boasting. But Greek political theorists were not only fascinated by the Spartans who fought at the battle of Thermopylae in 480; they also wondered how slightly more than a century later Sparta was ignobly defeated by Thebes at the battle of Leuctra in 371, after which Spartan hegemony collapsed. How did Sparta field citizen-soldiers in the 5th century who were without parallel in their bravery and military prowess? And why did Sparta, predominantly under the same political organization, collapse just over a century later? Such are the main questions that Xenophon, Plato, Aristotle, and Plutarch—what Cartledge (1999, 313–14)

[1] I am grateful to Carol Atack for challenging me both to think about how 4th century Greek intellectuals—a.k.a., political theorists—make sense of Sparta and to write a much-improved chapter, thanks to her knowledgeable and probing queries and comments. I am also grateful to Thanasis Samaras for identifying mistakes in the text.

has characterized as "political-theoretical" laconophiles—seek to answer in their writings about Sparta.

Before exploring how our political theorists make sense of Sparta, let me first provide a bit of historical context for their discussion of Sparta. The polis of Sparta emerged from the combination of five villages in the Eurotas valley in the Peloponnese during the Archaic period (c. 750); nonetheless, the remoteness of the villages in their mountainous terrain impeded their consolidation and Sparta famously lacked any surrounding walls or fortifications until the 2nd century.[2] Although inter-polis warfare was a common-place during the period, Sparta was unusual in that at the end of the 8th century, it successfully fought wars of subjugation and conquest against its western neighbor Messenia and its southern neighbor Laconia, wars which doubled the territory of Sparta and produced a subject or quasi-slave population known as 'helots'.[3] Herodotus is our first literary source that reports the rise of a lawgiver named Lycurgus in the early 7th century, although as Plutarch reports "generally speaking it is impossible to make any undisputed statement about Lycurgus the lawgiver."[4] Nonetheless, the political theorists whom I examine in this chapter on the whole accept that such an historical individual existed and almost single-handedly provided Sparta with a *politeia* or "constitution" that established many of its political and social institutions,

[2] Standard general histories of Sparta include Cartledge (2002) and Kennell (2010); Rahe (2016, 64–123) views that history through the lens of Spartan military policy; Cartledge (1987) is the standard history for Sparta of the 4th century (namely, the period in which Xenophon, Plato, and Aristotle are writing).

[3] See further Cartledge (2002, 113–70) and Kennell (2010, 76–92).

[4] See Hdt. 1.65–66, *Vit. Lyc.* 1.1; cf. Thuc. 1.18–19. Our sources differ both about the approximate date of Lycurgus and whether his laws were a 'one-off' event or a series of changes spread out over time. See further Ephraim (2020) and Rodrigues (2023).

governing everything from the mating of citizen couples to the configuration of its political offices and military forces. By the 6th century (if not earlier), Sparta was the undisputed hegemon and most powerful polis in Greece; by the middle of the 4th century, Sparta suffered military defeat and invasion, its citizen population had declined by over half, and its helots were freed from servitude.

Xenophon (431–355 BCE)[5]

In his *Memorabilia*, a depiction of the conversations and speeches of Socrates, Xenophon reports a dialogue between Socrates and Hippias of Elis (a 5th century itinerant teacher and contemporary of Socrates) on the nature of what is just (*to dikaion*) in order to illustrate Socrates' obedience to the laws. After Socrates and Hippias agree that justice is the lawful (*to nomimon* [*Mem*. 4.4.12]), Socrates reports that

> Lycurgus the Spartan—have you realized that he would not have made Sparta differ from other cities in any respect had he not established obedience to the laws most securely there? Among rulers in cities, aren't you aware that those who do most to make the citizens obey the laws are the best, and that the city in which the citizens are most obedient to the laws has the best time in peace and is irresistible in war?[6] (*Mem*. 4.4.15)

Xenophon is first and foremost an Athenian student of Socrates. But although Socrates reportedly departed from Athens only when he was fighting in campaign on behalf of his city, Xenophon spent much of his life outside Athens—first as a mercenary, fighting on behalf of the

[5] For recent discussion of Xenophon's views of Sparta, see Proietti (1987), Gray (2000), Ducat (2014), Christesen (2016), Bartlett (2018), Collins (2018), Humble (2018), Humble (2022), Schofield (2021), and Atack (2024).

[6] All quotations in my chapter derive from the Loeb Classical Library editions unless otherwise noted.

Persian usurper Cyrus the Younger (in 401, which Xenophon depicts in his *Anabasis*), then on behalf of the Spartan king Agesilaus (whom Xenophon depicts in both his history of the 4th century, the *Hellenica*, and in the encomium named after him), and finally as an exile living outside the polis framework. Indeed, Xenophon suggests that he himself was a member of the Spartan army that faced off against a Theban army at the battle of Coronea (395), a Theban army that included Athenian allies.[7] Following his service to king Agesilaus, Xenophon was apparently banished from Athens; he settled in in the Peloponnese at Scillous, near Olympia, on an estate provided by the Spartans (but within the territory of Elis) and is reputed to have had his sons educated in the Spartan educational system.[8]

Xenophon's surviving written works defy easy characterization by genre, but Sparta appears prominently in many of them.[9] First and foremost is his *Constitution of the Lacedemonians*, which I will examine at length below and which documents the social and political institutions and cultural framework said to have been prescribed by Lycurgus during the Archaic period. Xenophon's *Hellenica* and *Anabasis* are historical depictions of 4th century Greece and Persia in which Spartans feature prominently—both as individual mercenaries, such as Clearchus, one of the Spartan commanders in the *Anabasis*, and as leaders of Spartan armies in battle at the end of the Peloponnesian Wars and during the period of Spartan hegemony (404–

[7] See *Hell*. 3.1.2, and *Ages*. 2.11.
[8] See Diog. Laert. 2.6.51, 54, *Vit. Ages.* 20.2. Hobden (2020, 1–13) provides an overview of Xenophon's life and works; Atack (2024, 8–11) details Xenophon's complicated life outside the *polis* structure in the first half of the 4th century.
[9] For the range of Xenophon texts that examine Sparta, see Christesen (2016) and Rocchi (2020).

371).[10] Finally, Xenophon authored an "encomium" or speech in praise of the Spartan king Agesilaus, under whom he fought and who served as his patron when he resided in Laconia.[11]

Xenophon's use of numerous literary genres—Socratic dialogues, historical narrative, biography, constitutions, and even treatises on horsemanship and hunting dogs—raises a number of interpretive questions and challenges. The most important challenge is Xenophon's perceived "Laconizing" or pro-Spartan sympathies which one might claim undermine his importance as a critical or objective observer of Spartan institutions. For instance, his encomium of Agesilaus begins with the claim that

> I know that it is not easy to write a praise of Agesilaus that shall be worth of his virtue and glory, but nonetheless it must be attempted. For it would not be seemly if, because a man was perfectly good (*teleōs anēr agathos*), he should not, for that very reason, attain even lesser praises. (*Ages*. 1.1)

The claim that a Spartan king is "perfectly good" is rather strong. Numerous scholars note that one can find ample counter-evidence of such an estimation of Agesilaus' character in Xenophon's own *Hellenica*.[12] Nonetheless, Xenophon does appear to be experimenting with a specific genre of writing, namely an encomium speech, which is a specific form of epideictic rhetoric that aims

[10] Xenophon's critique of Clearchus and other Spartans is a significant part of his assessment of Sparta; see further Hornblower (2000) and Atack (2024, 91–92).

[11] Sparta also appears, albeit obliquely, in Xenophon's *Cyropaedeia*, perhaps especially in the educational system that Xenophon attributes to Persia (*Cyr*. 1.2.2–14). See further Tuplin (1994), Azoulay (2007), and Atack (2024, 94–102).

[12] See Tuplin (1993), Powell (2020), and Humble (2022, 221–36). Compare, for instance, *Ages*. 2.2 with *Hell*. 4.3.4; *Ages*. 2.20 with *Hell*. 4.6.4–12; and *Ages*. 3.4 with *Hell*. 4.1.3. Plutarch also supplies amble evidence to call into question the claim that Agesilaus possessed perfect goodness (see *Vit. Ages.* 10.6, 22.1–2, 26.1–5, 35.3, 36.1).

to praise a figure.[13] That Xenophon follows the conventions of an emergent genre hardly undermines his objectivity.[14] When I examine Xenophon's apparent criticisms of the *Constitution of the Lacedemonians* (*Lac*. 14) I will return to this issue. But at least initially, it appears charitable to understand some of Xenophon's claims about Sparta in light of his use of different literary genres—some of which he helped to craft as forms of prose writing.

Xenophon identifies the origins or objective of his *Constitution of the Lacedemonians* as follows:

> I, reflecting once that Sparta, though being one of the most thinly populated poleis, emerged as both the most powerful and the most renowned in Greece, wondered at how ever this had come about; but when I had observed closely the practices of the Spartiates, I wondered no longer.[15] (*Lac*. 1.1)

After briefly identifying the purpose of his investigation (*Lac*. 1.1–2), Xenophon subdivides his analysis into three parts: the Spartan educational system (*Lac*. 1.3–4.7), daily life practice (*Lac*. 5.1–10.8), and the nature of its dual kingship and the structure of its army (*Lac*. 11.1–15.9). Two prominent themes emerge from the details of Xenophon's observations. First, the Lycurgan

[13] Aristotle outlines the components of epideictic rhetoric in *Rhet*. 1.9 and Xenophon's chapters on Agesilaus' virtues (*Ages*. 3–9) seem to follow closely Aristotle's account (*Rhet*. 1.9.1366a32–b8). See further Humble (2020).

[14] That Xenophon uses the genre of encomia hardly entails the conclusion of Strauss (1939) that Xenophon intends his praise of Agesilaus (much less Sparta as a whole) to be merely ironic. Nonetheless, I think it is significant that although Plato and Aristotle articulate theoretical criticisms of the Spartan constitution, Xenophon offers no such analysis. Even if Xenophon's praise of Agesilaus were ironic, it would only follow that Agesilaus is not in fact "perfectly good"; such a claim offers no theoretical or systemic critique of the Spartan constitution or the virtues that it produces. See further Christesen (2016) and Humble (2022, 61–8).

[15] Throughout this section I quote from the Greek text and translation of the *Lac*. in Humble (2022, 294–331), with minor emendation. Although Xenophon starts the work with apparent uncritical praise of Sparta, the *Lac*. has a complex structure that suggests that Xenophon is concerned about the failure of the Spartans to live up to the values of their *politeia*.

politeia is fundamentally directed towards inculcating obedience (*peithō*) and shame or respect (*aidōs*). Indeed, Xenophon claims that Lycurgus made Sparta preeminent in happiness as a function of its obedience to his laws (*Lac*. 1.2). But such obedience is also a function of physical punishment exercised not only by the *paidonomos* (the public office of education supervision) but by any adult Spartiate (*Lac*. 2.2, 2.10–11, 6.1–2). The office of the Ephors (literally "overseers") exercise power that one might believe would terrify citizens into obedience; Xenophon likens them to tyrants who can exercise punishment on the spot (*Lac*. 6.3–4; cf. *Leg*. 4.712de). Xenophon reports that before handing down his laws, Lycurgus sought their approval by the oracle at Delphi, so that "it was not only illegal but also impious not to obey laws delivered by the Pythian god" (*Lac*. 8.5; cf. Hdt. 1.65). It is understandable that Plutarch, writing centuries later, can perceive a criticism that Spartans know only how to obey, not how to command (*Vit. Lyc.* 30.3–6).

Secondly, in Xenophon's description the Lycurgan constitution interpret human goodness rather narrowly as self-mastery with respect to pain and pleasure and martial courage. For instance, Spartan pederasty is directed towards a love of beautiful souls rather than bodies, public messes are designed to prohibit gluttony or drunkenness through social pressure, and prohibitions against commercial activities are designed to thwart desire for money.[16] Xenophon's extended description of virtue and human goodness makes clear both the narrowness of the Spartan interpretation of virtue and the extraordinary social pressure that inculcates it. After noting that Spartans would choose a good death instead of a shameful life, he writes that

[16] See *Lac*. 2.13, 3.2; 5.4–6; 7.3, 7.6. See further Cartledge (1981a).

> To speak the truth, safety actually more of the time follows valour (*aretē[i]*) rather than cowardice (*kakia[i]*); for indeed valour is both easier, more pleasant, more resourceful and stronger. And it is clear that glory also, above all, follows valour; indeed, all men want somehow to fight alongside brave men (*agathois*)….[Lycurgus] clearly procured happiness for the brave but unhappiness for cowards (*kakois*). For in the other poleis when someone is a coward, he only gets the reputation of being a coward, but the coward goes to the same market as the brave man and sits beside him and exercises with him, if he so wishes. In Lacedaemon, however, everyone would be ashamed to take a coward as a messmate, and everyone likewise to have him as a training partner in wrestling. (*Lac*. 9.2–4)

Although Xenophon uses general Greek terms for virtue and vice (e.g., *aretē/kakia*) and a good and bad man (e.g., *agathos/kakos*), Humble (2022, 315 n. 39, 40) is quite right to render the former terms as valour/cowardice and the latter terms as a brave man/a coward. Context makes clear that virtue and goodness, within the framework of Xenophon's depiction of the Lycurgan laws, are cashed out primarily in terms of martial bravery.[17]

Xenophon concludes the *Constitution of the Lacedemonians* by noting that contemporary (i.e., 4th century) Spartans are "manifestly obeying neither the god nor the laws of Lycurgus" (*Lac*. 14.7). More specifically, according to Xenophon—due to Spartan hegemony—4th century Spartans have abandoned modest living in Laconia for positions as harmosts or military governors of other territories and have relinquished a fear of owning gold and now pride themselves on its possession (*Lac*. 14.2–3). Humble (2022) takes this passage and others to indicate that although

[17] Schofield (2021) notes that my authors debated whether as an historical point the notion of goodness aimed at in Sparta was in fact narrowly militaristic (like Cleinias describes the Cretan constitution in the *Laws*) or much broader. He argues that we should place Xenophon, Plato, and Aristotle in the former camp and Plutarch in the later camp. *Lac*. 9.2–4 is a good example of what Schofield has in mind; it also seems striking that the *Constitution of the Spartans* says almost nothing about intellectual virtue (unlike Plutarch's account of the Spartan constitution).

Xenophon appears to offer uncritical Laconizing praise of Sparta, in fact the *Constitution* is a subtle critique of the Lycurgan laws. She writes that "Xenophon has, in effect, shown how the Spartan system contained the seeds of its own destruction" (197). But as Aristotle implies in his own analysis of Sparta in *Politics* 2.9, theorists face two options when confronted with Sparta's collapse in the 4th century: either the Lycurgan *politeia* is intrinsically flawed (in which case the problem lies with the laws themselves) or Spartans have failed to follow the Lycurgan laws (in which case the problems lies with a failure on the part of 4th century Spartans). A straight-forward reading of *Lac*. 14 suggests that Xenophon opted for the latter choice (cf. Pl. *Leg*. 1.630d). It seems telling in this regard that Xenophon, unlike Plato and Aristotle, never explicitly offers a theoretical explanation or critique of the Lycurgan laws. Rather, Xenophon seems to hold a position similar to that of Plutarch, which identifies the problem of Sparta in terms of its departures from the Lycurgan laws.[18]

Plato (428–348 BCE)[19]

Whereas Xenophon praises Sparta (albeit with subtle criticisms), Plato praises Sparta but with much less subtle criticisms. Numerous Platonic dialogues invoke Sparta as an example of "good government" (*eunomia*) that produces law-abiding virtuous citizens and Plato often uses Sparta

[18] Carol Atack suggests that Xenophon's critique of Sparta in the *Anabasis* and *Hellenica* supports the claim that Spartan military failure seems to arise from within its existing culture and not from failure to live up to the values of the *politeia*.

[19] For recent discussion of Plato's views of Sparta, see Lévy (2005), Schofield (2006), Futter (2012), Meyer (2015), Herrmann (2018), Humble (2018), Friedland (2020), and Schofield (2021).

to stand in place as an example of virtue and its education, especially martial virtue.[20] Plato's *Crito*, a dialogue that depicts Socrates' obedience to the laws of Athens even when they unjustly condemn him to death, reports that Socrates never decamped to Sparta or Crete, even though he repeatedly described them as "well-governed" or "good ordered" (52e5–6).[21] Plato's *Republic* is especially interested in what Schofield (2006) calls the "*politeia* tradition," namely the notion that "the whole nature of society and the development of the individual alike could be transformed in tune with each other if the city itself made sure that it had not just an educational system, but an entire cultural environment designed with the single-minded aim of fostering virtue and the desire to become 'a perfect citizen'" (37). Although Plato's *Laws*, praises what it calls Sparta's "mixed constitution," it also commences with a thorough criticism of Spartan (and Cretan) militarism. Plato's works depict Sparta as a praiseworthy example of a *politeia* understood as a comprehensive educational and political social-system, albeit one that by the 4th century is misoriented.

Although the *Republic* contains many themes, prominent is the notion that musical, gymnastic, and mathematical education are important components of a comprehensive social-

[20] Plato often juxtaposes Athens and Sparta with respect to virtue. See, for instance, *Alc* 120b–124a; *2 Alc* 148b–149b; *Leg.* 1.641e; *Lach.* 183a–c; *Tht* 162c, 169b. The *Menexenus* documents the relationship between Athens and Sparta in the 5th century, both as allies and as foes; see *Menex.* 240c, 241c, 242a–c, 244cd, 245b, 246a; see also *Leg.* 3.686b, 3.698e. The Spartan character in the *Laws*, Megillus, reports that his family holds an honorary consulate in Athens and expresses fondness for the Athenian accent and way of life (1.642b–d). For serious invocations of Spartan "good government" see *Tim*. 23c–d, 25 b–c; *Critias* 110c–112d. For humorous invocations, see *Prt*. 342a1–3, *Hp. Mai.* 283e2–84a5. See further Schofield (2006, 38–9).

[21] Cf. Xenophon, *Mem*. 4.4.15, which I discussed above in my chapter section on Xenophon.

system that crafts the souls of its citizens. As Xenophon's *Constitution of the Spartans* made clear, Sparta developed one form of such a *politeia* and Plato's *Republic* appears to prescribe a system similar in some ways to that found in Sparta. Consider, for instance, the living arrangements that Socrates describes for the ruling class (i.e., the philosopher kings and queens) of the *Republic*:

> "Consider if they should live and reside in some such way as follows," I said, "if they are going to be men of this sort: first of all none of them is to have acquired any personal property which is not absolutely necessary. Then none must have any dwelling or storehouse of any sort to which there is not free access to anyone who wishes to enter. They will have such supplies as men need who are fit to fight, sound of mind and courageous, covenanting from the rest of the citizens to receive so much pay for their duties as guardians that they will not have a surplus nor a shortfall at the end of the year. They will eat regularly in a mess and live together like troops in camp. We shall tell them that they have divine gold and silver from the gods forever in their souls, and that they have no need of human gold and silver in addition." (*Resp*. 3.416d5–e8; cf. 5.458c–d)

Although the *Republic* does not explicitly characterize its communal living and meals as Spartan, their description in the *Laws* makes clear their Spartan and Cretan origins (*Leg*. 6.780b–e). But the *Laws* also makes clear that the *Republic* corrects a crucial oversight in the Spartan social arrangements: whereas men and women in the guardian class partake of communal living in the *Republic*, the Spartan constitution fails to make any provisions for the education of women (*Leg*. 6.780e2–781b4). As the Athenian stranger puts it: "Better, for the city's well-being, to remedy this, put it straight, and make joint regulations for all activities, for men and women alike" (*Leg*. 6.781b4–6).

Within the *Republic*, Socrates characterizes Sparta and Crete as examples of timarchy, namely an unjust constitution in which the auxiliary (i.e., the warrior) class rules rather than the

philosopher kings (*Resp*. 8.544c1–3, 8.545a2–3; cf. 8.547d4–9).[22] Such honor-loving rulers "neglected the true Muse, the companion of discussion and philosophy, and honored physical training more than musical training" (*Resp*. 8.548b8–c2; cf. 8.546d6–8, *Leg.* 2.673b–e). What Socrates appears to have in mind is that the Spartan *politeia* focuses upon physical training and competition to the neglect of musical education. But in his own account of education in books 2 and 3 of the *Republic*, Socrates argued that physical and music training needed to be harmonized, lest one "become an unmusical hater of argument who no longer uses argument to persuade people, but force and savagery" (*Resp*. 3.411d7–e1; cf. 3.410c8–411d5). Whereas Socrates' education system is designed to produce truth-loving philosophers, Sparta's educational system produces only victory or honor-loving warriors (*Resp*. 5.475b–d, 8.547e–c; cf. 9.581a–582d).[23]

Plato's most extensive critique of Sparta is found in the first book of the *Laws*, in which the Athenian Stranger calls into question the militaristic focus on inter-polis warfare that he thinks determines the whole focus of the Spartan *politeia*. Plato first describes such a focus in the mouth of the Cretan character, Cleinias. The Cretan lawgiver Minos, whom the Spartans followed, thought that

> what the greater part of mankind calls peace is merely a name; the reality is that for cities the natural state of affairs is an undeclared war of all against all. If you take the view of Crete's lawgiver, what you will find, broadly speaking, is that he framed all our institutions, in the private and public sphere, with an eye to war, and that he bequeathed us our laws to keep safe on the understanding that there

[22] See further Schofield (2006, 101–4, 259).

[23] Socrates claims that such timocratic citizens "will have an appetite for money just like those in oligarchies, passionately adoring gold and silver in secret, owning storehouses and private treasuries where they can deposit them and keep them hidden" (*Resp*. 8.548a5–8; cf. 8.550d9–12). Both Xenophon (*Lac*. 14.2–3) and Aristotle (*Pol*. 2.9.1270a13) claim such love of money is characteristic of 4th century Spartans under the influence of their hegemony.

> is no benefit in anything else—neither in possessions or in activities—unless you are first victorious in war, since all the property of those who are conquered becomes the property of their conquerors. (*Leg.* 1.626a2–b3, Griffin trans.)

Cleinias suspects that his Athenian companion agrees with him, to which Megillus retorts "An inspired guess! What other answer could any Spartan possibly give?" (*Leg.* 1.626c3–4).[24]

The Athenian Stranger's critique of Cretan and Spartan militarism is two-fold. First, he persuades Cleinias that war internal to a political community—namely civil war (*stasis* [1.630b5])—is a far more treacherous thing, and its avoidance a more important end, than external conflict between different cities. The lawgiver's focus should be upon how to maintain friendship and peace between citizens within the same city (*Leg.* 1.628a–c). But the more important argument—one which redirects the conversation to the question of how human goodness should orient the lawgiver in general (*Leg.* 1.630c–e)—concerns the nature of the highest good.

> But what is best is not conflict, not civil war (things we pray there will never be a need for), but rather peace—yes, and amity—with one another. And further, it looks as if a city gaining the upper hand over itself did not come in the category of 'best', but in the category of 'necessary'… To be a true lawgiver, one's provisions for time of war must be based on the demands of peace, rather than his provisions for peace being based on the demands for war. (*Leg.* 1.628c8–d1, d6–e1)

Although avoidance of internal strife is important, even a focus on internal strife is myopic. But underlying both civic concord and external harmony with other political communities is the goal

[24] On this exchange, see further Schofield (2021, 453–54).

of peace. Plato's *Laws* thus stands at the beginning of the just war tradition of viewing peace as the telos or goal of war in opposition to the militarism of the Cretan and Spartan constitutions.[25]

Although the *Republic* appears to be focused on Sparta's social and educational institutions, Plato's most detailed discussion of Spartan political or constitutional institutions is found in his praise of Sparta's "mixed constitution" in *Laws* 3 and 4. When asked to name the constitutional form of his own polis, the Spartan character Megillus responds

> I can't give you a clear-cut answer. I don't know which of those we ought to call it. It looks very like a tyranny, I would say, in that it has the ephorate—a body with powers remarkably like those of a tyrant. Yet there are times when it seems, of all cities, to come closest to democracy. But then again, to say it is not an aristocracy is completely ridiculous. And then of course it contains monarchy for life…I am unable to make a classification, or say which of these systems of government it is. (*Leg.* 4.712d3–e2, e4–5; cf. *Lac*. 6.3–4)

Book 3 of the *Laws* provides a critical history of political structures that includes an extended reflection on the Doric territories of Sparta, Argos, and Messene (3.683c–693c) that helps to elucidate Megillus' inability to classify the Spartan constitution. Whereas Persia and Athens are grounded in the principles of pure monarchy and pure freedom, the Athenian stranger claims that Sparta (and Crete) "have a better balance" (*metria* [3.693e5–8]) because of their incorporation of "due measure" or "proportion" (*metrion* [3.691c2, d4, e1, 692a8]). The Spartan legislator (the Athenian stranger refrains from identifying him, but apparently he has both Lycurgus and Theopompus in mind) grafted onto the absolute power of the dual kingship both a council of elders (namely, the 28-person Gerousia) and five annually elected ephors or

[25] See, for instance, Aristotle, *Pol*. 7.14.1333a34–36 and Cicero, *Off*. 1.35. The Athenian Stranger in the *Laws* claims that it is incorrect to attribute Spartan and Cretan militarism to Lycurgus and Minos, rather than to their successors who misinterpreted their laws (Pl. *Leg*. 1.630d-631b).

"overseers" (*Leg*. 3.691d–692a). Although Plato characterizes the mix as one of measure or order, one might also characterize the Spartan constitution in terms of "checks and balances."

Aristotle (384–322 BCE)[26]

Aristotle quite clearly is familiar with and arguably in dialogue with both Plato and Xenophon concerning the nature of Sparta. In numerous discussion in the *Politics*—for instance, the nature of Spartan militarism, its lack of fortifications, or its lack of social and educational institutions for women—Aristotle appears to pick up and elaborate upon threads already quite prominent in Plato's *Laws*.[27] Like Xenophon, Aristotle speaks highly of Sparta's model of public education;[28] but unlike Xenophon, he attributes Sparta's 4th century collapse directly to its "legislator" (i.e., Lycurgus) rather than to later disobedience to Lycurgan laws. Indeed, on this point Aristotle explicitly engages his contemporaries who

> praise the Spartan constitution and express admiration for the aim of its legislator, because his entire legislation was intended to promote conquest and war. What they say is easy to refute by argument, and has now been refuted by the facts too….Thibron and all these other writers are no different: they admire the Spartan legislator because by training the Spartans to face danger he enabled them to rule over many. And yet it is clear, now that their empire is no longer in their hands at

[26] Parenthetical references in this part of my chapter refer to Aristotle's *Politics* unless otherwise noted. For recent discussion of Aristotle's views of Sparta, see Schütrumpf (1994), Lévy (2001), Bertelli (2004), Hitz (2012), Rubin (2012), Becchi (2014), Lockwood (2017), Lockwood (2018), and Schofield (2018).

[27] For instance, on Spartan militarism compare *Leg.* 1.625c–631a with *Pol*. 7.14.1133a37–1334a10; on Sparta's lack of walls compare *Leg*. 6.778d-779d with *Pol*. 7.11.1330b18-1331a18; on the education of Spartan women compare *Leg.* 6.780a–781d with *Pol*. 2.9.1269b12–1270a33. Aristotle also devotes *Pol*. 2.6 to numerous but relatively brief criticisms of the *Laws*; but as Schofield (2010) notes on that text, one wonders whether Aristotle "has been reading the same dialogue as we have" (13). See further Morrow (1960).

[28] See *EN* 10.9.1180a25–29; 7.2.1324b5–9, 8.1.1337a30–32. See further Ducat (2006, 119–27).

> any rate, the Spartans are not a happy people and that their legislator is not a good one. Further, this is ridiculous, namely, if while keeping to his laws, and there being no impediment to making use of them, they lost their noble way of living. (7.14.1333b12–15, 18–26, Reeve trans.)

In general, Aristotle appears to follow both Plato's critique of Sparta in the *Laws* and Plato's praise of Sparta's mixed constitution. Whereas Xenophon and Plato (and as we will see, Plutarch also) blame the collapse of Sparta on the failure of Spartans to obey Lycurgus' laws, Aristotle believes that Lycurgus' laws were themselves flawed.

Although Aristotle has a number of scattered remarks about Sparta in his ethical and political writings, he provides sustained and substantive analysis of Sparta in three places.[29] *Politics* 2.9 examines Sparta alongside several constitutions purported to be well-governed with respect to Aristotle's technical notion of *politeia*, namely as the organization of its various offices and structures of political administration.[30] *Politics* 4.9 examines Sparta as a mixed constitution that balances democratic and oligarchic elements. Finally, *Politics* 7–8 examines the Spartan educational system—both its goals and its methods—in conjunction with Aristotle's articulation of his own "best constitution," one which in many respects corrects Lycurgan mistakes while nonetheless embracing the Lycurgan project of crafting virtuous citizens (albeit not exclusively courageous citizens) in a comprehensive public social-system.[31]

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[29] Aristotle also offers a substantive analysis of Spartan kingship, albeit without critical evaluation (3.14.1285a2–15, 1285b23–24).

[30] See 3.6.1278b8–14, 3.7.1279a25, 4.3.1290a6–10, 4.11.1295a38–41; see further Schofield (2006, 33–4).

[31] Lockwood (2018) argues that Aristotle's incorporation of the Spartan educational framework and institutions into the program of his own best constitution and his description of the citizens in his best regime suggests that he views his best constitution through "Spartan eyes," seeking for it an educational model based upon the ideal of the free citizen-soldier.

The second book of the *Politics* is devoted to the examination of constitutions that are reputed to be well-governed—including both theoretical proposals (like that of Plato's *Republic* or Hippodamus' urban planning) and existing city-states (specifically, Crete, Sparta, and Carthage).[32] Although Aristotle often provides positive comparative evaluations—for instance, Sparta, Crete, and Carthage all share analogous political offices, but Aristotle judges Carthage as having the best organization of each office in all three cases[33]—in general Aristotle offers criticisms of Sparta rather than praise. He identifies six areas of critique, the last of which—the underlying principle of the constitution—he postpones significant discussion of until *Politics* 7–8 (2.9.1271a41–b9, 7.2.1324b3–15, 7.14.1333b6–33). The five other areas of critique are: (1) the system of using helots to supply Spartiates with leisure; (2) neglect of female education; (3) de facto inequality of property (due to female dowries and inheritances) that decreases the number of Spartiates or full citizens; (4) the offices of the Ephors and the Gerousia; and (5) private supply of food for the public messes.

Space does not permit me to unpack all five of Aristotle's criticisms, but since it is a point of dialogue between Plato, Aristotle, and Plutarch, let me discuss the second critique, namely the claim that Lycurgus neglected the education of women. As noted in my discussion of Plato above,

[32] 2.1.1260b27–35. See Lockwood (2015) for an overview of the details of *Politics* 2 and Lockwood (2017) for the criteria of evaluation that Aristotle uses to evaluate best constitutions.

[33] Aristotle judges the Spartan overseers as superior to the Cretan order keepers, and the Carthaginian 104 as superior to the overseers (2.10.1272a27–35; 2.11.1272b34–36); he makes extended criticisms of the Spartan and Cretan senates, but his criticisms of Carthage's senate are minor and ultimately he praises it as aristocratic (2.9.1270b36–71a8; 2.10.1272a35–39; 2.11.1273a13–18); and he judges the Carthaginian office of king better than that of the Spartan office (2.11.1272b37–1273a1).

in the *Laws* the Athenian stranger criticizes the Spartan mess-hall system for providing no place for the socialization of women (*Leg*. 6.78d–781a). Aristotle extrapolates from the same objection that

> the legislator, wishing the whole city-state to have endurance, makes his wish evident where the men are concerned,[34] but has been negligent in the case of women. For being free from all constraint, they live in total intemperance and luxury. (2.9.1269b19–23)

Such negligence resulted in the licentiousness (*anesis*) of Spartan women which undermined male martial virtue in two ways. First, licentiousness inculcates intemperance and luxury in Spartan women, which in turn infects Spartan men with the inculcation of a love of money, a habit that wives transmit to their families (2.9.1296b12–24, 1269b39–1270a15; cf. 1271a18). Second, Spartan sexual obsession—as the pairing of Aphrodite and Ares in myth reminds us (2.9.1269b28–29)—empowers Spartan women to dominate their men (*gunaikokratoumenoi* [1269b24–25]). Aristotle notes,

> That is why the same happened to the Spartans, and why in the days of their hegemony, many things were managed by women. And yet what difference is there between women rulers and rulers ruled by women? The result is the same. Audacity (*thrasutētos*) is not useful in everyday matters, but only, if at all, in war. Yet Spartan women were very harmful even here. They showed this quite clearly during the Theban invasions. (2.9.1269b30–36)

Although Spartan free women make up half of their polis' free population, their educational neglect appears to be a major cause of Sparta's decline and a defect more generally in Greek city-states.[35]

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[34] 2.9.1271b1–7; cf. *Vit. Lyc*. 22.2 and *Lac*. 14.1–7.

[35] 2.9.1269b18–19. Aristotle's remarks about Spartan women making up half the polis appear to be an allusion to his insistence on education for women (1.13.1260b19). Aristotle's own remarks

Politics 4.9 analyzes Sparta's mixed constitution, albeit with a focus rather different than Plato's analysis. As noted in the previous section, books 3 and 4 of the *Laws* presents Sparta as a moderate balance between Persian monarchy and Athenian democracy as a function of its checks and balances upon autocracy (*Leg*. 7.693e).[36] By contrast, Aristotle analyzes Sparta's mixed constitution in light of the problem of factionalism and the polarization of cities between the wealthy and the poor (or oligarchies and democracies).[37] Aristotle tacitly acknowledges that the long-term stability of the Spartan constitution is a function of its mixture of oligarchic and democratic elements such that it is possible to describe the constitution as both a democracy and an oligarchy. The Spartan constitution incorporates democratic elements, such as

> the way sons are brought up (for those of the rich are brought up like those of the poor, and are educated in the way that the sons of the poor could be). Similarly, at the next age, when they have become men, it is the same way (for it is not entirely clear who is rich and who is poor). The food at the communal messes is the same for everyone, and the rich wear clothes that any poor person could also provide for himself. Further, of the two most important offices, the people elect candidates to one and share in the other (for they elect the senators and share in the overseership);

But, Aristotle continues, the Spartan constitution also incorporates oligarchic elements such as

> all the officials are elected and none chosen by lot, a few have control to impose death and exile, and there are also many other such elements. In a constitution

about women's education are scattered through *Pol.* 7.16 (including explicit guidelines for co-ed physical education [1335b10–11]).

[36] Aristotle identifies such "checks and balances" in his discussion of Spartan kingship, which the Spartan king Theopompus weakened (by instituting the Ephors as a check) but which overall strengthened the constitution (5.11.1313a25–33).

[37] See 4.3.1290a13–15, 4.11.1296a20, 5.1.1301b40, 5.4.1304a37. See further Fischer [IN THIS VOLUME] on the nature of *stasis*.

> that is well mixed, by contrast, both elements should seem to be present, and also neither. (4.9.1294b21–31, 32–36)

Here we see Aristotle balancing his extensive criticisms of the Spartan constitution in *Politics* 2.9 with an appreciation of the salutary elements of its overall organization of offices and norms.[38]

Aristotle's account of Spartan education in *Politics* 7–8 claims that their inability to exercise the virtues of leisure make them like an iron sword which, although apparently sharp in battle, loses its edge and becomes useless in times of peace (7.14.1334a8–9). Aristotle's central criticism of Sparta's educational system is that although the polis rigorously trained its soldiers, they were incapable of acting well as citizen off the battlefield. Spartan education at best produces mediocre soldiers; it fails entirely to produce excellent citizen-soldiers.[39] Aristotle's discussion of education in his own best constitution identifies two major problems with Spartan education, first with respect to its goal of domination and secondly with respect to its elevation of courage and endurance as the highest virtues.[40]

First, Aristotle agrees with the Athenian stranger in the *Laws* that Spartan education is based upon a fundamentally mistaken notion of happiness or well-being and its goal (*horos*) of domination. The Spartans believe that the most choiceworthy life for a city is an active one, and by active they mean exercising dominion or masterly rule over their neighbors (7.2.1324b3–9),

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[38] Aristotle makes similar claims about how the constitution in Plato's *Laws* balances democratic and oligarchic features (2.6.1266a6–23; cf. *Leg*. 1.293d, 3.701e, 6.756e), although he fails to use Plato's balance between democracy and monarchy (*Leg*. 7.693e; cf. 6.756e). Rather perversely, Aristotle claims that "in the *Laws* it is said that the best constitutions should be composed of democracy and *tyranny*" (*Pol*. 2.6.1266a1–2, emphasis added).

[39] Atack (2024) notes that Xenophon makes similar criticisms in *Hell*. 6.2.4-23.

[40] Aristotle also criticizes the means of Spartan education, specifically their gymnastic and musical curricula (*Pol*. 8.4.1338b9–38, 8.5.1339a41–b9). See further Lockwood (2018, 103–05).

presumably a policy of territorial domination like that which Sparta exercised during its period of hegemony following the Peloponnesian Wars from 404 to 371 BCE.[41] Individual happiness for a citizen participating in the life of such a city is constituted by the exercise of the martial virtues which make such domination militarily possible. Aristotle has a quiver full of criticisms against the claim that domination is the best way of life for a city: it mistakes statesmanship for mastership, it fails to distinguish just and unjust uses of force, and it mistakes war, rather than peace, as the ultimate goal of a polis.[42]

Secondly, with respect to the Spartan elevation of endurance as the highest virtue, in *Politics* 7.15 Aristotle discusses those virtues which education ought to inculcate and again turns to Sparta as a foil for his own educational program. Since the human end consists in engagement in excellent activities of leisure, Aristotle claims that education should inculcate those virtues useful for leisure—both those activated during leisurely pursuits (*diagōgē*) and those involved in the work (*ascholia*) to secure leisure (*scholē*). Thus, he writes that

> courage and endurance (*karterias*) are required for work, philosophy for leisure, and moderation for both, but particularly for peace and leisure. For war compels people to be just and moderate, but the enjoyment of good luck and the leisure that accompanies peace tends to make them arrogant. Much justice and moderation are needed, therefore, by those who are held to be doing best. (7.14.1334a22–29)

Although Aristotle certainly recognizes a place for the martial virtues of endurance and courage in his own account of education in the best constitution, both virtues are oriented towards what he calls 'necessity' rather than what is leisurely (7.15.1334a18). Sparta's elevation of endurance

[41] See further Lockwood (2019).
[42] See 7.2.1324b23–37, 1325a5–10.

as the highest or perhaps even only virtue leaves its citizens incapacitated to exercise the other virtues of leisure, something Aristotle describes as especially shameful. Spartan men show themselves as good when working and fighting, but slavish when at peace and at leisure (1334a38–39).

Plutarch (46–119 CE)[43]

Whereas Xenophon, Plato, and Aristotle all lived during the time of Sparta's collapse in the 4th century BCE, Plutarch lived centuries later, long after Sparta had been absorbed into the Roman Empire, along with all the other Greek city-states.[44] Such chronological perspective provides Plutarch access to many literary sources unavailable both to the 4th century theorists I have examined and to contemporary scholars. Indeed, Plutarch indicates that he had first-hand experience of Sparta, including the lashing of Spartan ephebes at the altar of Artemis Orthia.[45] His writings include "lives" or biographies of Spartans such as Lycurgus, Lysander, Agesilaus, Agis, and Cleomenes; attributed to him are also a tractate that records the ancient customs of Sparta and collections of the *Sayings of Spartans* and *Sayings of Spartan Women*. Like Xenophon's *Constitution of the Spartans*, Plutarch's life of Lycurgus includes an extended analysis of Spartan social structure, including its educational system and common messes (*Vit. Lyc.* 10–12, 16–18);

[43] For recent discussion of Plutarch's views of Sparta, see De Blois (2004), Hershbell (2004), Futter (2012), Lane (2013), Becchi (2014), and Lucchesi (2014).
[44] See further Roskam (2021, 1–37).
[45] See *Vit. Lyc.* 18.1; cf. *Lac.* 2.9. Plutarch also suggests that he has access to archival sources that allowed him to determine the names of Agesilaus' wife and daughters (*Vit. Ages.* 19.6). For a brief introduction to Plutarch's sources, see Talbert (2005, xxi–xxiv, xxviii–xxix).

like Aristotle's *Politics* 2, the life of Lycurgus also includes extended analysis of Spartan political offices and land redistribution, including the text of Lycurgus' Great Rhetra (*Vit. Lyc.* 5–13). For the purposes of this chapter, Plutarch is especially valuable because he critiques the analyses of Xenophon, Plato, and Aristotle on crucial points about Spartan social and political institutions. Let me first discuss the method of Plutarch's lives; I will then examine his analysis of Spartan society and the causes of its collapse in the 4th century; I will conclude the section and chapter with a consideration of Plutarch's critique of the other authors I have examined.

Plutarch as an author explores several genres, although for the purposes of this chapter the most important are his parallel lives in which he places side by side the "lives" or biographies of two famous individuals (usually one Greek, one Roman). The juxtapositions themselves are telling: the Spartan Lycurgus is paired with the Roman King and lawgiver Numa Pompilius; the Spartan general Lysander is paired with the Roman general Sulla; and the Spartan king Agesilaus is paired with the Roman general and political leader Pompey. Thus, we have neither Xenophon's encomia of Agesilaus nor the Socratic dialogues of Plato nor even the historical narrative of Xenophon. Rather, Plutarch offers biographies that supply much historical detail for political theory and often substantive evaluation of their subjects.

Although Plutarch's life of *Lycurgus* acknowledges the difficulty of determining factual details of its legendary object (*Vit. Lyc.* 1.1), it distinguishes between laws that Lycurgus himself made to Spartan society in response to instability during the Archaic period and changes that accumulated after Lycurgus purportedly took his own life (since his fellow citizens swore an oath to follow his laws until he returned). So, for instance, Plutarch follows Plato in attributing to

Lycurgus the establishment of the office of the Gerousia, land redistribution, and public messes; but he attributes the office of the Ephors to the later king Theopompus and the establishment of the brutal anti-Helot practices of the *krypteia* to a post-Messenian rebellion in the 5th century.[46] From the perspective of political institutions, according to Plutarch Lycurgus' fundamental view was that

> happiness in the life of a whole city, as in that of one individual, derives from its own merits and from its internal concord (*homonoias*) within its own borders. The aim, therefore, of all his arrangements and adjustments was to make his people free-minded, self-sufficient, and moderate in all their ways, and to keep them so as long as possible. (*Vit. Lyc.* 31.1)

But from the perspective of the various social and educational reforms, the life of Agesilaus claims that just like natural philosophers posit the forces of conflict and discord to explain the movements of the heavenly bodies,

> in the same way the Spartan lawgiver seems to have introduced the spirit of ambition and contention (*to philotimon kai philoneikon*) into his constitution as an incentive to virtue, desiring that good citizens should always be somewhat at variance and in conflict with one another.[47] (*Vit. Ages.* 5.3)

Thus, although Plutarch likens Spartan society to a beehive in which personal identity is dissolved into group identity (*Vit. Lyc.* 25.3), over and over he exhibits both the educational causes and historical effects of such competition, perhaps especially in the lives of *Lysander* and *Agesilaus*.[48]

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[46] See *Vit. Lyc.* 5.6–7, 8.1–3, 10.1–3; 7.1–2, 28.6.

[47] For this theme in Xenophon, see *Lac.* 4.1–6, 10.1–3; for it in Plutarch, see *Vit. Lyc.* 16.5, 26.1; *Vit. Ages.* 2.1–2, 23.6–7; *Vit. Lys.* 21.2–4.

[48] The rivalry between Agesilaus and Lysander (who originally were pederastic lovers [*Vit. Ages.* 2.1]) is particularly strong (*Vit. Ages.* 6–8); see also the rivalry between Agesilaus and Xenophon (*Vit. Ages.* 9).

Plutarch dates Sparta's practice of "good order" from the time of Lycurgus' laws until the kingship of Agesilaus in the 4th century.[49] Like Plato and Aristotle, Plutarch offers extended analysis of Sparta's collapse and defeat by Thebes at the battle of Leuctra. Proximate causes include both Lysander's re-introduction of wealth, in the form of the gold and silver that Lycurgus' constitution prohibited, and Agesilaus' repeated campaigns against Thebes, which a Lycurgan rhetra prohibited (lest a foe, through repeated exposure to Spartan tactics, develops the means to defeat them).[50] But in his life of Agesilaus, he compares Sparta to a human body which, although healthy, "has consistently followed too strict and sever a lifestyle: just one error tipped the scales and overturned its entire success"; Plutarch continues that

> we should not be surprised by this. The Spartans' constitution was perfectly designed to promote virtue and peace and harmony. But they [Lysander and Agesilaus] then added empire and sovereignty won by force, elements which in Lycurgus' view were unnecessary for maintaining the happy life of any state; and so they were overthrown. (*Vit. Ages.* 33.2)

Plutarch is clear: according to him, "Lycurgus left nothing undone or neglected" and "in so far as human foresight could achieve this, he longed to leave Sparta immortal and immutable in the future" (*Vit. Lyc.* 27.2, 29.2). Like Xenophon and Plato and unlike Aristotle, Plutarch blames Sparta's collapse as a function of its departure from the Lycurgan laws; the laws themselves, were not the cause of Sparta's problems.[51]

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[49] Plutarch identifies Sparta's "good order" as commencing with Lycurgus and ending under Agesilaus (*Vit. Ages.* 34.1; *Vit. Lyc.* 29.6).

[50] On Lysander's re-introduction of wealth into Sparta, see *Vit. Lys.* 2.4, 16–17, *Vit. Lyc.* 30.1–2; on Agesilaus' violation of Lycurgus' rhetra concerning repeated wars, see *Vit. Lyc.* 13.5–6, *Vit. Ages.* 26.3–4.

[51] For example, see Plutarch's discussions of the *krypteia* (*Vit. Lyc.* 28.6) and Lysander's reintroduction of gold and silver (*Vit. Lyc.* 30.1, *Vit. Lys.* 16–17). Plutarch's *Inst. Lac.* include a text

By means of conclusion, it is worthwhile to put Plutarch in dialogue with his theoretical predecessors in order to clarify the agreements and disagreements between my four authors. Plutarch is clearly familiar with Plato's critique of Sparta in the *Laws*, the main focus of which Plutarch articulates as the claim that Lycurgus' laws "are well designed to develop valour, but fail to foster the practice of justice"; Plutarch thinks that Plato may have arrived at that claim based on the indiscriminate killing of helots done by members of the *krypteia* or "secret police" which was tasked with the intimidation and subjugation of Sparta's helot population.[52] But as noted above, Plutarch denies that Lycurgus—whose character he viewed as "mild and fair"—designed such anti-helot institutions (*Vit. Lyc.* 28.6). Plutarch was also clearly familiar with Xenophon's *Constitution of the Spartans* which attributed to Sparta a narrow educational focus, namely inculcating only valour and obedience.[53] By contrast, Plutarch depicts the Spartan educational system as far more well-rounded than that found in Xenophon's *Constitution of the Spartans*. According to Plutarch, the Spartan education system included instruction in sound judgment (*phronein* or *apokrisis*) and the ability to express wisdom Laconically, namely in a few words; it

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that claims that "as long as the Spartan State adhered to the laws of Lycurgus and remained true to its oaths, it held the first place in Greece for good government and good repute over a period of 500 years. But, little by little, as these laws and oaths were transgressed, and greed and love of wealth crept in, the elements of their strength began to dwindle also…" (42).

[52] *Vit. Lyc.* 28.1–2; cf. *Leg*. 1.633bc. Plutarch also notes Plato's criticisms of the Gerousia and the Ephors (see *Vit. Lac.* 5.4 with *Leg*. 1.691e and 7.1 with *Leg*. 1.692a) and that Plato derives his own theory of government from Lycurgus' model (*Vit. Lyc.* 31.1).

[53] Plutarch cites Xenophon's *Lac*. only with respect to the birth date of Lycurgus (see *Vit. Lyc.* 1.3 with *Lac*. 10.8); but in the *Vit. Ages.* 4.2 he denies Xenophon's claim that Agesilaus gained so much power that he could do as he liked. See also Xen. *Ages.* 9.1–2, 29.1–2.

also includes instruction in music and lyric poetry.[54] Plutarch also expresses surprise at the claim that Spartan's only knew how to obey and he provides numerous examples of Spartan leaders who exhibit the ability of command.[55]

Plutarch appears quite familiar with Aristotle's critiques of Spartan in the *Politics* and scholars suspect he likely had access to the *Constitution of the Spartans* composed in Aristotle's school. But although he often quotes approvingly from Aristotle's accounts—for instance, quoting verbatim Aristotle's positive judgment of Theopompus' moderation of Spartan autocracy[56]—Plutarch takes Aristotle (and, ultimately Plato) to task twice, once explicitly and once (I suspect) implicitly. Within his discussion of Spartan family policy, Plutarch reports that

> Aristotle claims wrongly that [Lycurgus] tried to discipline the women but gave up when he could not control the considerable degree of license and power attained by women because of their husband's frequent complaining… Lycurgus showed all possible concern for them too. (*Vit. Lyc.* 14.1–2)

[54] For sound judgment, see *Lac*. 16.5, 18.3; for instruction in Laconicisms, see *Lac*. 19–20; for musical instruction, see *Lac*. 21. Xenophon fails to mention any of these instructional programs in his *Constitution of the Spartans*. See further Mossman (2023) for evidence of Spartan rhetorical training.

[55] See *Vit. Lyc.* 30.3–6. Plutarch's example of Lysander as a harmost is complicated: although it is true that he commanded the respect of the Ionian Greeks whom he freed from Persian rule and became "master of the Greeks," Plutarch himself notes that Lysander did a very poor job at placing competent decarchies in power in the cities he freed, including Athens (see *Vit. Lys.* 13.4–5, 21.1–4). When Xenophon criticizes the conduct of Spartan harmosts (*Lac*. 14.4), he seems to have precisely an individual like Lysander in mind.

[56] *Vit. Lyc.* 7.1–2; cf. *Pol*. 5.11.1313a25–33.

What follows is an extended analysis of Lycurgus' educational reforms for women, which included physical education, gender egalitarianism, and modest nudity, which granted women "equal participation in both excellence and ambition."[57]

As we saw above, Aristotle has his own version of the critique of Spartan focus on bravery, namely that it incapacitated them to exercise leisure when they were not at war. Although Plutarch does not mention Aristotle by name, he appears to have his criticism in mind in his account of "adult education." He notes that "Spartiates' training extended into adulthood, for no one was permitted to live as he please"; but such a lifestyle hardly stunted the Spartans or incapacitated their ability to make use of leisure. Rather, according to Plutarch,

> abundant leisure was unquestionably among the wonderful benefits which Lycurgus had conferred upon his fellow citizen….Except when they went on campaign, all their time was taken up by choral dances, festivals, feats, hunting expeditions, physical exercise, and conversation. (*Vit. Lyc.* 24.1, 2, 4)

Although it is hard to adjudicate between Aristotle and Plutarch on this debate, I hope this chapter makes clear that Greek thinkers took great interest in Spart's development of a social system that cultivated its citizens and a political system that mixed different forms of political power to ensure stability. Equally clear is that by middle of the 4th century, Spartan hegemony and empire collapsed almost entirely. Although my four political thinkers have provided nuanced accounts of that model and its collapse, already in the first century of the common era those accounts were undergoing revision and debate.

[57] *Vit. Lac.* 14.4; see 14.1–4 with Cartledge (1981b) and Pomeroy (2002: 159–160). Aristotle's analysis of Spartan gender norms may express more so his own views on the subject.

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